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Ms S Mbubaegbu  
The Principal  
Highbury College  
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Dear Ms Mbubaegbu

Ofsted survey inspection programme – narrowing the gap in literacy and numeracy

Thank you for your hospitality and the warm welcome I received from you and your staff, during my visit 04 December 2008 to look at the college's work in literacy, ESOL and numeracy. I appreciate the time and care taken to prepare for my visit, especially by Deborah See and Sue Ward.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of skills for life, my visit had a particular focus on how effectively your college is narrowing the gap for young people and adults by enabling them to learn and improve their literacy and numeracy skills to a functional level. The visit also evaluated the level of expertise within your college/organisation to support learning English as an additional language.

My visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included interviews with senior directors and managers, tutors, students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, including achievement data and observation of four teaching sessions.

The overall effectiveness of the college in narrowing the gap for young people and adults by enabling them to learn and improve their literacy and numeracy skills was judged to be very good.

## Achievement and standards

Achievement in literacy, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and numeracy is good. Very high success rates have been maintained for literacy and numeracy over the last three years. Retention is generally very high, although retention on one-year literacy programmes for 16-18 year olds is relatively low. Success rates for key skills show a steady improvement and are above national benchmark levels.

- Students are achieving functional skills for life, often from a very low base line.
- Observed students are keen to learn and they complete set tasks well and with enjoyment.
- The quality of work in students' files is of a good standard and commensurate with achieving successful learning outcomes.
- Students are developing good independent learning skills through participation in entry level programmes prior to mainstream courses.
- Success rates for literacy and numeracy on most courses are very high and over 90%. Retention is very high at around 95%.
- Lower retention of 16-18 year olds on the one-year literacy programmes is resulting in lower success rates. Achievement rates of completers, however, are very high.
- Success rates for key skills have improved steadily over the last three years.
- Success rates in key skills across the vocational areas, at 64–73%, are now 10-20% above national benchmarks.
- ESOL students are making good progression; to courses at higher levels, to mainstream vocational courses, and in some cases into employment.
- Achievement of nationally recognised work-related qualifications and certificates by ESOL students is good.

## Quality of teaching and learning of literacy, ESOL and numeracy

The quality of observed teaching and learning is good.

- Tutors' management of sessions is effective; firm, but friendly, and supportive approaches were adopted. Tutors engage particularly well with students and this strongly supports learning.
- Sessions are well planned with clear identification of learning aims and objectives.
- Good interdepartmental working between staff provides effective ESOL support within a strong vocational context.
- ESOL students develop good knowledge and understanding of further learning pathways and progression to employment.
- ESOL programmes are effective in raising students' confidence and self-esteem and providing optimism and motivation to achieve.
- Cultural and national diversity is promoted well and helps to develop social integration through racial tolerance.

- Vocational programmes are supported effectively by integrated skills for life.
- Good liaison and understanding between skills for life and vocational tutors to provide synchronised learning.
- Generally well-resourced sessions and good use of interactive whiteboards effectively engage students' interest.
- Teaching sessions are well planned and the level and pace of learning is appropriate to the ability and knowledge of individual students.
- Initial assessment findings and individual student profiles guide planned learning.
- Students with additional needs are well supported by learning support assistants (LSAs). However, planned activities for LSAs are not well described in lesson plans and their effectiveness is dependent upon individual initiative.
- Tutors are effective in engaging the students in learning and using students' experiences and opinions as a basis for informative group discussions.

### Quality of the provision

The quality of provision for young people and adults with skills for life below a functional level is good.

- The college has particularly effective strategies for developing students' independent learning skills through participation in initial pre-entry level programmes to improve students' skills for life and provide them with a widened understanding of vocational opportunities and better skills to progress towards these.
- Arrangements for initial assessment and diagnoses of learning needs have been improved and the findings are used well to plan individual learning.
- Students are enabled to progress in their learning through a range of skills for life interventions.
- Support for students is very good and well suited to meet the needs of diverse groups.
- Strong resourcing of additional learning support, as part of the college's strategy and commitment to full skills support, is enabling disadvantaged students to participate and achieve.
- Strong focus on raising low self-esteem through achievement; the setting of incremental targets is providing students with 'quick wins' and an early motivation through achievement.
- Effective use of tutor mentors to provide support and guidance to students at risk of failing.
- Good use of enrichment activities to motivate disadvantaged students, for example, students on the Back on Track programme.

## Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

The leadership and management of provision for young people and adults with skills for life below a functional level are outstanding. Successful features include:

- clear strategic policies and procedures which prioritise the integration of skills for life throughout vocational learning
- clear management responsibilities for skills for life and inter-departmental working to provide cohesive learning support
- very strong partnership working with external agencies and organisations and community groups
- strong focus of the college on meeting the learning needs of its local community and widening participation of 'hard to reach' students and those from disadvantaged groups
- effective initiatives to integrate ESOL programmes with mainstream vocational programmes; good inter-departmental co-operation
- well developed quality improvement procedures focusing on review and responsive revision to meet students' learning needs.

## English as an additional language

The level of expertise within the college/organisation to support young people and adults with learning English as an additional language is outstanding. ESOL is delivered within the context of developing students' cultural and social awareness and effectiveness to support vocational progression pathways.

- Outstanding development of ESOL students' knowledge and understanding of further learning pathways.
- Good progression by ESOL students to higher level courses, to mainstream vocational courses and into employment.
- Strong interdepartmental working between staff is providing effective ESOL support within a strong vocational context.
- ESOL programmes are raising students' confidence and self-esteem and providing optimism and motivation to achieve.

## Inclusion

The college works well in partnership with external support agencies and organisations and with community groups to widen participation.

- The college is successful in locating and engaging with 'high risk' and 'hard to reach' students. Its enrolment of students, for example, from minority ethnic groups, those with mental health problems and young people not in education, training and employment remains significant.
- The college is effective in tackling social exclusion by providing social and life skills within the integrated context of skills for life and specialised vocational skills.

- Successful strategies to enrol students from minority ethnic backgrounds and socially deprived areas.
- Provision of additional learning support and the mentoring scheme is enabling participation by students with low skills levels.
- Good support for learners with individual learning needs, for example, LSA support and use of laptop in class for a student with dyslexia.
- Good promotion of social inclusion in classes is enabling students to work harmoniously together across cultural and social backgrounds.
- ESOL students gain qualifications/certificates, such as health and safety and manual handling certificates to support progression to employment.
- Bespoke programmes in partnership with the local primary care trust are providing good support for students at risk of social exclusion owing to mental health problems.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving retention on one-year literacy programmes for 16-18 year olds
- continuing to develop skills for life within Train to Gain programmes
- greater clarification of the role of LSAs within lesson plans to maximise LSAs' effectiveness.

I hope my findings are useful as you continue to develop your cross-college skills for life provision.

As I explained in the pre-visit letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority/local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next college inspection.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Boughton  
Her Majesty's Inspector